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ABSTRACT

The focus of this practitioner brief is: What happens when students identify the skill areas they feel need the most work and then are given class time, resources, and strategies to work in these areas? This learning strategy was tried by one teacher of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) because the students in his class were either too far above or below the language ability norm in the class or were not making adequate progress in their English language learning. The instructor decided to give students time and resources in class, as well as strategies to work on their goals outside of class, so that each student's individual needs would be met. In addition, he arranged to have higher and lower students work with volunteers, used tiered cooperative learning activities so that all were working within their skill level, provided multiple level reading exercises, had extension activities ready for students who finished their work quickly, and matched students with computer software appropriate to their needs and learning level. In the end, the teacher's strategies for supporting and encouraging learner-directed learning did not work. Students recognized where their weaknesses were, but they could not on their own productively use the extra time and resources to make progress. Using volunteers, computer software, and textbooks was more effective. (KFT)

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Reaching All Students in an ESL Class

Kiran Sandhu, Arlington Education and Employment Program

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Reaching All Students in an ESL Class

Kiran Sandhu, Arlington Education and Employment Program

Background

I teach English as a Second Language at the Arlington Education and Employment Program. Classes meet for 10-15 hours a week for a 12-week cycle. In my classes, I had problems addressing the needs of those students who were far above or far below the "norm" or the majority of the class. I found that students for whom the class was too easy weren't making adequate progress because they were not being sufficiently challenged. On the flip side, I found that the students for whom the class was too difficult were having trouble keeping up and were often confused. Therefore, they were not making significant progress. I thought I needed to spend a lot of time and energy planning elaborate lessons in order to meet the individual needs of all students. This posed a problem because I do not have a lot of time to plan elaborate lessons.

To meet students' individual learning needs, I decided that I would ask them to identify a language area (reading, writing, speaking or listening) where they felt they needed extra work. Improvement in this area would become each student's goal for the instructional cycle. I planned on giving students time and resources in class, as well as strategies to work on their goals outside of class, so that each student's individual needs would be met. I was curious to see if goal work would help me reach the students for whom the class was too easy or too difficult.

Inquiry

What happens when students identify goals to address the skill areas that they feel need the most work and then are given periodic class time, resources and strategies to work in these areas?

Action

During the second week of class, students talked about their strengths and weaknesses in English and identified areas in which they felt they needed extra practice. Then they thought about how they would know their English had improved in this skill area. This specifically was their language learning goal, e.g., "my goal is to read a short newspaper article". After this, they were given time to reflect and document how they would work on this outside of class. The following week, I planned time and provided resources for students to work on their goal areas. In addition to giving students time to work on goals, I employed various strategies for meeting the needs of all students:

- I incorporated time for the higher and lower students to work with volunteers in order to give them more individualized learning opportunities.
- I used tiered cooperative learning activities so that all students were working within their skill level but contributing equally to a group activity.
- I used resources that provided multiple levels of reading and exercises so all students were working with the same information but at different levels.
- I had extension activities ready for students who finished an activity quickly.
- I matched students with computer software appropriate to their learning needs during computer lab times.

Data Collection

The most significant data came from a log I kept. In this log, I reflected on the goal setting process, how students worked on their goals, and what I did to plan lessons that would meet the needs of all students. I also focused on the progress of two students. The first, Omar, was making progress quickly and the class became too easy for him. The

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second, Juan, had never learned to read in his native language and needed specifically to work on his reading skills.

Other data included notes on lessons that worked well in providing all students with material appropriate to their individual levels; writing samples from Omar and Juan that demonstrated their progress; and notes from conferences with Omar and Juan.

Findings

By having them identify areas where they need extra work, I found that students often recognize where their weaknesses lie. In contrast however, when I gave them time and resources to work on their goals in class they got bored. After about 15 minutes of working on their goals, many students decided to work on something else. Furthermore, many students forgot what their goals were and worked on whatever seemed interesting to them at the time.

In order to get students to plan how they could work on their goals outside of class, I asked them to respond in writing to the question, "How will you practice English at home?" Most responded with how they would practice their English at home regardless of their goals. For example, although no one chose listening as his/her goal area, many said they would watch TV as a way to practice English at home.

Students responded positively to the strategies I used in my lesson planning:

"Thank you for giving me extra work." (Omar)
"I am reading more...I understand this story." (Juan)
"I like working with the volunteer" (Omar and Juan)

I believe that because of this inquiry, Juan got the attention he needed and thereby became a better reader. Omar was given opportunities to do more advanced work, which enabled him to skip an instructional level.

Implications and Future Directions

Through this inquiry I realized that the way I tried to use goals to address student needs did not work. We spent little time in class on goals because students were uninterested or did not remember them. So, goals were not helping me get to the students I was trying to reach.

As a result of this inquiry, how I planned for my classes changed. I actively started planning lessons so that all students would be involved, and I realized that this did not take a lot of time, it just took changing my planning strategies. Thus, in designing a lesson, I took into consideration how it could be easily adapted to accommodate learners who fell outside of the collective by using resources that were available to me, i.e., volunteers, computer software, and textbooks. I solved my problem of addressing the needs of all students more adequately without spending much extra time planning.

I will continue to use these planning strategies in the future. In addition, I will keep looking for new strategies that foster meeting the needs of all students. For example, now that I have found ways to meet the needs of the students for whom a class is too easy or too difficult, I feel compelled to focus on planning lessons that address different learning styles. ❑

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